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## **Teachers and educational policies: negotiating discourses of male role modelling**

### **Abstract**

Since the 1990s, there has been some considerable discussion in England and in other countries of boys' underachievement and of male teachers serving as 'role models'. Drawing on two separate research projects, this article explores the diverse ways in which individual teachers negotiate discourses of role modelling, while also considering the performative nature of these discourses and some of their effects. While discourses of role modelling have become more subdued in the recent years, the article shows that they retain some currency among teachers and highlights the need for ongoing research in this area to inform policy-makers' and practitioners' work.

**Keywords:** teachers, gender, role models, education policy, England

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## Introduction

Since the 1990s, there has been some considerable discussion in education policy of boys' underachievement and, related to that, of male teachers serving as 'role models'. Such discussion has unfolded in a number of countries, including Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) (see Arnot, David, & Weiner, 1999; Bouchard & Saint-Amant, 1996; Brown, 2012; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Martino, 2008; Rezai-Rashti & Martino, 2012; Mills, 2005; AUTHOR 1, 2014; AUTHOR 2, 2014). While it is often assumed that boys' underachievement and the 'lack' of male role models in schools represents a global concern, it has generated limited interest in some countries, for example in parts of the 'Global South' and in France (AUTHOR 1, 2011a; Robert, Pitzer, & Muñoz García, 2016). Moreover, even where this discussion has unfolded, it has taken various forms which are context-specific (e.g. with a focus on White working-class boys in some countries and on Black boys in others). This debate has been particularly vivid in England (AUTHOR 2, 2014, 2015b; Epstein, Elwood, Hey, & Mans, 1998; Francis & Skelton, 2005; Hutchings et al., 2008; Maylor, 2009; Skelton, 2002; Skelton, Francis, & Valkanova, 2007), where a wealth of policy initiatives have been implemented (see, for example, DCSF, 2009; DfES, 2004; DfES, 2005a). While there has been a noted reduction in the prominence of this 'policy drive' in the recent years, discussions of role modelling retain some currency in public and professional arenas with the notion of role model itself having become part of a 'common-sense' discourse (Lyndon, 2015; Robb, Featherstone, Ruxton, & Ward, 2015; Tarrant et al., 2015).

In England, where the research reported in this article was conducted, discussions of role modelling have been overwhelmingly related to concerns about boys' underachievement, although such discussions have also been linked to girls' and women's under-representation in STEM [science, technology, engineering and mathematics] subjects and careers (MacDonald, 2014; Marchetti & Raudma, 2010). Despite the fact that the term 'role model' is often left undefined, discussions of role modelling in English education policy have usually been underpinned by a constant set of assumptions. In particular, it has been claimed that boys are 'underachieving', that students see their teachers as 'role models', and that providing boys with same-sex teaching role models will have a positive effect on their sense of identity, their behaviour and their educational attainment (see

discussions in Francis et al., 2008; Hutchings, 2002; AUTHOR 1, 2011a). In England, this discourse of role modelling also coexists and interconnects with a discourse of ‘feminisation’, which constructs the presumed statistical and normative feminisation of the teaching profession and of school cultures as a ‘problem’, while male teachers and the ‘re-masculinisation’ of teaching are presented as the ‘solution’ (see discussions in Pepperell & Smedley, 1998; Skelton, 2002, AUTHOR 1, 2014). Such views need to be reinstated against the broader national and international context of recuperative masculinity and backlash politics (Faludi, 1991; Lingard & Douglas, 1999), which claim that the traditional gender order has been inverted and that women and minority groups are now in a dominant position.

Despite the considerable amount of policies and research articles dedicated to this topic, a relatively modest body of work has specifically explored how teachers themselves engage with the discourse of role modelling. This dearth of research implies that teachers passively absorb and implement policies and plays down their ability to ‘encode’/‘decode’ policy discourses (Hall, 1973). The scarcity of work in this area appears problematic, as the views that teachers and school leaders hold about gender and other equality matters have been found to influence the formers’ pedagogical practices and the latters’ decisions about staff recruitment, deployment and promotion (AUTHOR 1, 2008; Skelton, 2002; Spender, 2002) – all matters which in England have been increasingly devolved to school level.

The theoretical approach underpinning this article is similar to the one adopted in our earlier work (e.g. AUTHOR 1, 2011a) and draws on a social constructivist perspective informed by feminist poststructuralist theories of gender in education (Connell, 1987; Skelton & Francis, 2009). According to this approach, gender is conceptualised as a power relation and a key component of societies and individual identities (Le Feuvre, 2008). Centre stage is given to the concept of discourse, defined as a set of social practices and ideas which form the objects of which they speak (Foucault, 1969; MacLure, 2003). In other terms, discourses are ‘performative’ rather than simply indexical or descriptive (Foucault, 1969; Litosseliti, 2006). Discourses help to establish and maintain relationships of power and define the subject positions available to individuals who simultaneously engage in negotiating discourses (Litosseliti, 2006; MacLure, 2003).

This article pursues a dual purpose. Firstly, it explores the ways in which individual teachers engage with discourses of role modelling. Secondly, it considers the performative nature of discourses, i.e. how they produce what they name (Butler, 1993; Francis, 2006; Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984). In doing so, this article adopts a deconstructive standpoint which acknowledges the need ‘to resist the inscriptions that draw us towards some unproblematised acceptance of the “truth”’ (Raphael Reed, 1999, p. 93), while simultaneously considering the effects of the circulation of such ‘truths’ (AUTHOR 1, 2011a).

### **Research and policy context**

In the 1970s and 1980s, UK policy concerns around gender and education focused on girls’ attainment and their subject and career choices. Around the same period of time, a significant body of work looked at the ‘hidden curriculum’ of schools and at its effects on girls (Sharpe, 1976; Deem, 1980; Griffin, 1985; Mahony, 1985; Stanworth, 1987; Woods, 1990). From the 1990s onwards, this focus shifted to boys who were thought to be underachieving in the midst of a ‘crisis of masculinity’. Related to this policy shift, a significant body of work started to question the claims underpinning discourses of role modelling, highlighting in particular the lack of supporting evidence and their uncertain theoretical basis (Arnot, David, & Weiner, 1999; Arnot & Mac an Ghaill, 2006; Carrington, Tymms, & Merrell, 2005; Epstein et al., 1998; Francis & Skelton, 2005; GEA, 2009; Hutchings et al., 2008; AUTHOR 1, 2011a). Despite a lack of evidence and, more recently, the emergence of a body of work highlighting that teachers’ gender has no impact in most contexts on students’ attainment (Helbig, 2012; Lam, Tse, Lam, & Loh, 2010; Neugebauer, Helbig, & Landmann, 2010), many policy-makers did, and continue to argue, that the statistical and normative feminisation of teaching deprives boys from role models, ultimately causing their underachievement (DfES, 2005a). In the UK, the interconnectedness between the discourse of role modelling and the discourse of the feminisation of schools is well-exemplified in a declaration of Anthea Millett, the former Chief Executive of the then Teacher Training Agency (TTA), who argued that ‘[t]he feminisation of the [teaching] profession leads to an absence of male role models for many of our pupils, particularly those from the majority of one parent families’ (Millett, 1999, p. 2). Views such as Millett’s construct the feminisation of the

teaching workforce as a problem that needs to be fought, as it allegedly deprives children, particularly boys, from male teachers, brings into schools ‘feminine values’ which are seen as necessarily endorsed by women and girls, and threatens the professional status of teaching. In comparison, male teachers are presumed to provide (positive) role models for boys as their physical presence is presumably sufficient to improve boys’ sense of identity, behaviour and attainment (Robb et al., 2015).

In England, these concerns have characterised most governments in place since the late 1990s, with some unusually consensual views on the topic across the political spectrum (for a more detailed account of this, see AUTHOR 1, 2011a). After the New Labour government arrived in power in 1997, the Green Paper *Teachers: Meeting the Challenge of Change* (DfEE, 1998) revealed how governmental concerns for the ‘modernisation’ of the profession and its ‘re-masculinisation’ meshed together. Over the years, this concern persisted. In 2002, the then TTA launched a campaign to attract more men. A few years later, its successor, the now defunct Teacher Development Agency (TDA), aimed to attract candidates from ‘under-represented groups’ to teaching, referring *inter alia* to men (TDA, 2007). David Blunkett, then Secretary of State for Education and Employment in England, claimed that underachievement was ‘linked to a laddish culture’ and called for ‘better role models in our schools and society more generally’ (DfEE, 2000, cited in Carrington and Skelton, 2003, p. 254). Damian Green, then Shadow Education Secretary, expressed some similar concerns (BBC, 2002) and so did the then General Secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), David Heart: ‘We’re going to face a catastrophic situation over the next five years. We can’t afford to let teaching become an all-female profession. It will cause long-term damage to the education of boys, of that there’s no doubt’ (cited in Pyke, 2000). In some instances, concerns for boys intersected with race and class, with, for example, ‘Black boys’ and ‘White working-class boys’ specifically mentioned (Abbott, 2002; Meikle, 2007). Over the years, policy-makers have devoted some extensive resources to improving boys’ attainment and to attracting and retaining male teachers, including the creation of the now defunct Gender and Achievement website primarily focusing on boys’ underachievement, the production of guidance documents targeting school head teachers and teachers (e.g. DfES, 2005b), with a number of Ofsted reports also being published on the topic (Ofsted, 1996, 2003a, 2003b) and research commissioned in this area (e.g. DfES, 2007; Younger & Warrington, 2005). Such concerns

have also been picked up extensively by the media (see Meikle, 2007) and by higher education institutions, a number of which offered bursaries to men who enrolled on teacher education programmes. From the late 2000 onwards, discussions of role modelling seem to have lost their past prominence, yet retain some currency and continue to permeate governmental, media and public discourses, albeit in a more insidious and pervasive form (see, for example DfE, 2013; Weale, 2015).

### **Methodological framework**

The data discussed in this article arise from two separate research projects: a cross-national comparative study of gender inequalities in the secondary school teaching profession in England and France (AUTHOR 1, 2009, 2011b), referred hereafter as Project 1, and a study of the experiences of men working in the early years sector (0-8) in England (AUTHOR 2, 2011, 2015a), referred hereafter as Project 2. The unique grouping of these projects gives this article a wider scope which enables us to look at the way discourses of role modelling circulate and are taken up or resisted by individual teachers in a range of educational settings.

The first project (AUTHOR, 2011b) generated 60 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, half of which were conducted with secondary school teachers working in England and are used for the purpose of this article. The other half was conducted with secondary school teachers working in France. However, none of the French participants made reference to the notion of role modelling or boys' underachievement, with also very limited discussions of this in policy circles (this is something we have explored in a separate paper - see AUTHOR 1, 2011a); as such, the French fieldwork was discarded. The project focused on gender and career progression, with a similar proportion of men and women being interviewed, all of them qualified teachers aged between 30 and 50. Apart from the gender and age criteria, the recruitment of participants sought diversity rather than representativeness in relation to variables likely to influence their experiences, i.e. geographical area, type of job, type of school, subject taught and family circumstances. Sampling operated through a snowballing method (Blanchet & Gotman, 1992). Interviews transcripts were subjected to a thematic analysis (Robson, 1993). Themes were refined following a careful reading of the transcripts with the identification of sub-themes (AUTHOR 1, 2011b). The data on which this article draws were identified through a

search of key words, i.e. *role model*, *feminised*, and *feminisation*, and through a careful reading of the interview transcripts, with data coded under two themes identified for the specific purpose of this article: *discourses of role modelling* and *the effects of these discourses*.

The second research project informing this article focused on capturing the voices of men working in the early years sector (defined as educational provision for children aged 0 to 8 years old) in a county in the East of England (AUTHOR 2, 2011, 2015a). The research embraced a mixed-method staged approach (Clough & Nutbrown, 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). At Stage One of the project, male participants were drawn from early years provision in the county and were invited to complete a postal questionnaire. Eighty-four questionnaires were returned by a range of male practitioners who were working either as qualified early years teachers, nursery nurses, teaching assistants or after-school providers, or were training to be teachers in the 0-8 sector. At Stage Two a focus group interview was conducted with a sub-sample of three men who were, or who had experience of, working in a senior management position in primary school settings. This article draws specifically on the focus group material, although the analyses are also broadly informed by the questionnaire data. The analytical method used for this second project mirrors the approach adopted in the first project in terms of searching for key words and the coding of data under the two specific themes previously mentioned.

### **Teachers negotiating discourses of role modelling**

#### *Teachers taking up discourses of role modelling*

Since teachers as role models was a key focus of Project 2 (AUTHOR 2, 2011), it is perhaps unsurprising that participants to this project discussed this notion at length. In comparison, participants in Project 1 (AUTHOR 1, 2009, 2011b) were not asked directly about role modelling. However, five of them (out of 30) mentioned it spontaneously. While policy discussions of role modelling have primarily focused on primary schools, this implies that this discourse has been ‘taken up’ by teachers at other levels of the school system, though not necessarily in an overwhelming way (Lumpkin, 2008).

Overall, interviewees’ narratives identified being a role model as a central and positive component of their professional identity, although it also came with some challenges – a point to



which we come back to later in this article. For example, in the following excerpt, being a role model is presented as a positive historical shift and is incorporated into a narrative of ‘progress’ – from an authoritarian, discipline-driven pedagogical relationship to leading by example through respect and good behaviour:

*There is a change, I think. Eighteen years ago discipline was a little different to now. I think you could sometimes then just shout quickly to get them quiet and they would be. You could then be nice to them. I think now if I were to shout at a girl she might shout back... I think now... you've got to lead by example. If I'm trying to teach young children and young adults how to behave, then I must model that good behaviour myself and treat them with some respect and expect it back as well. (Jack, Secondary, Project 1)*<sup>1</sup>

The notion of role model has been criticised for being fuzzy, polysemous and rarely defined (Casper & Schultz, 1999; Skelton, 2002). Indeed, participants in the two research projects on which this article draws rarely provided a clear definition of the term, although discussions across the two projects converged in acknowledging that this notion broadly promotes the idea of copying or imitating someone. This view implicitly positions children as passive and powerless in the learning process as they are thought to ‘absorb’ the information transmitted by teachers who are constructed as agentic and powerful, despite extant research showing that power relations play out in more complex and intersectional ways in the classroom (Walkerdine, 1990):

*I think [the role model is] someone who through their behaviour is... seen as... providing a positive example to others. (Ben, Primary, Project 2)*

*...in its most simplest term it's just something that you'd want children to copy... behaviours... attitudes, values, actions, words, relationships... and I think that's how children probably see it, they try to copy Mr [X] or copy Mr [Y]. (Will, Primary, Project 2)*

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are in use throughout the article.

Discussions of role modelling also appeared to be underpinned by a number of shared assumptions. Some of these assumptions echoed policy discourses, including the views that: pupils need role models, teachers provide (positive) role models to pupils, and having a role model has a positive impact on pupils in terms of attainment, behaviour and identity formation. The term ‘role model’ was seen as relevant to teachers of both gender groups. As one teacher put it: *I think being a teacher is being a role model, whether you’re male or female, you’re still a role model* (Alan, Primary, Project 2). Yet discussions rarely referred to women as role models - a discursive absence which reflects the policy focus on male role models.

#### *Teachers negotiating policy discourses of role modelling*

However, beyond the commonalities noted above, some discrepancies were also found among participants’ views of role modelling. In particular, the gender-matching component of the discourse attracted some divergent views. Three main narratives were identified in relation to this aspect. The first narrative resisted the view that students adopt same-sex role models and that the gender-matching of students and teachers is a desirable ambition. This narrative is exemplified by Christopher, who rejected the view that gender-matching is beneficial and played down the influence of gender in the student-teacher relationship, instead emphasising the multiple and intersectional dimension of learners’ identities:

*...the girls that we teach, they don’t fit into little compartments....some of them respond better to females and some of them respond better to males... there are a lot of different teachers, lots of different ethnicities, lots of different, you know, male and female...in the end there is something for all the girls.* (Christopher, Secondary, Project 1)

Likewise, Matthew played down the significance of gender, emphasising instead the need for a ‘good’ teacher (presumably referring to pedagogical skills):

*I think there can be excellent teachers both male and female and there are at this school and my old school I was at and I’m sure in every school in the country. I don’t think it makes any difference. I think good female teachers can relate to boys and the male*

*teachers can relate to girls and that happens quite a lot.* (Matthew, Secondary, Project

1)

A second narrative reproduced the view that pupils choose same-sex role models and that gender-matching is a desirable occurrence. By arguing that women are better role models for girls and men are better role models for boys, this narrative is underpinned by an essentialist, one-dimensional and fixist conception of gender, with women and men constructed as relatively homogeneous categories. Jack's words, for example, exemplify the gender-matching role model rhetoric, as he explains that 'as a man doing PE it [gender] always is going to influence it because (a) the sports you're doing but also the boys look up to you as some kind of a sporty chap, role model' (Jack, Secondary, Project 1).

A third narrative assumed that boys as well as girls would benefit from being taught by men, although this was not always stated explicitly. For example, in some instances, interviewees used the gender neutral term 'kids' but talked more gender-specifically about male teachers, suggesting that male teachers were 'positive' role models for boys and for girls without ever applying the same rhetoric to women teachers. In other instances, interviewees more explicitly established the benefits of having a male role model for boys and for girls. Ian, for example, explained that:

*... good male role models, and I would stress the 'good', can have a really good impact because I don't think it's just good for boys; I think some of my most favourite, the children who most latch onto me are the girls.* (Ben, Early Years, Project 2)

It is worth noting here how this third narrative silences the possibility of women teachers acting as a role model and also constructs the feminisation of teaching (and women teachers themselves) as 'the problem', with men teachers presented as 'saviours' and the masculinisation of teaching as 'the solution' (Brown, 2012; Pepperell & Smedley, 1998). This stance fits into policy and media discourses which in England and some other countries across the 'Global North' have blamed the feminisation of teaching for the (presumed) loss of prestige and de-professionalization of the profession, while also accusing women teachers of lacking authority, ambition and commitment (see examples in Gove, 2011; Millett, 1999; Symeonidis, 2015; Wansell, 2001). Some interviewees took up this deficit discourse of women teachers, such as Ashton who argued that 'in primary I think it's

loaded to females and I don't think that's a good thing for the kids' (Ashton, Secondary, Project 1), while Kathleen explained that 'In my last school...it was an all-girls school... there were far more women teachers than men, and I think that gave the students a very skewed view on life. It wasn't a healthy outlook, because it was dominated by too many women' (Kathleen, Secondary, Project 1). We now turn to explore some of the gendered effects of these discourses.

### **The gendered effects of role modelling theories on teachers**

Discourses are not solely rhetorical matters. They have multiple effects, as they form the objects of which they speak (Foucault, 1969; MacLure, 2003) and help to establish and maintain power relations (Francis, 2006; Henriques et al., 1984; Litosseliti, 2006; Raphael Reed, 1999). As discussed above, in England, the view that male role models could benefit boys (and sometimes girls), in terms of educational attainment, has resulted in the mobilisation of a wealth of resources to support the policy view (AUTHOR 1, 2011a). Likewise, the narratives of our research participants suggest that discourses of role modelling influence teachers', school managers' and sometimes parents'/carers' views and professional practices in a range of ways. In our research, we have identified that discourses of role modelling have two major sets of effects: they encourage the surveillance of male teachers and they reinforce male privilege and gender inequalities. We now set out to explore these aspects in more detail below.

#### *Masculinities under surveillance*

Who teachers are and how they behave is of long-lasting and widespread concern (Bullock, 2015). Women teachers' private lives and bodies in particular have historically been subjected to high levels of surveillance (Mallozzi, 2014; Oram, 1989; Tamboukou, 2003). With male teachers now regarded as role models, this surveillance has extended to this group, with their behavioural, presentational and moral characteristics now attracting considerable attention compared with what can be observed in other professions (Lunenberg et al., 2007). Participants of the two research projects on which this article draws discussed feeling that their behaviour was scrutinised and often felt pressured in adopting and conforming to certain (gendered) ways of being, in conjunction with other discourses positioning

them as potential child abusers and sexual predators (Cushman, 2010; Jones, 2004). For example, Ben explained that:

*...the other thing that strikes me about the whole concept [of role model] is that it's a sort of double edged sword... it comes with a burden that I've got a job to do here... and maybe I ought to be a male role model, [but] I'd rather just be a teacher thanks, don't... don't label me with male or role model at all, thanks... some people don't want to get into that... (Ben, Primary, Project 2)*

Expectations that male teachers must behave as 'proper men', i.e. adopt the characteristics broadly associated with dominant, heterosexual masculinities, while also being caring but avoiding the discursive position of the sexual predator, often proved difficult to navigate by participants. As argued by Jones (2004, p. 53), in a context in which the demands of a risk-management culture (Beck, 1992) have intensified 'the risk of sex abuse accusation, [this] is one of many risks that now must be managed by teachers'. The need for panopticonic self-discipline (Foucault, 1982) was experienced most acutely by men working in early years settings as they dealt with the apparent contradiction between doing masculinity and working with/caring for young children (an activity commonly and culturally constructed as 'feminine'):

*... you are expected to be this male role model and this caring teacher but I'm more wary about the way that... that I am with those children and being careful about the things that I do to the children that you could quite easily go in and see a female teacher doing, for example sitting a child on your knee or, erm... or going into a toilet... (Alan, Primary, Project 2)*

### *Role modelling theories and the reassertion of male privilege*

The way gender relationships play out in schools mean that male teachers were often allocated tasks that were socially constructed as masculine, for example organising sports activities and lifting/carrying heavy objects, in the same way that their female counterparts tend to be allocated the more caring roles (Acker, 1995). As Ben (Primary, Project 2) argued,

[You hear things like] *Could you get something heavy down off the shelf?*” and *”You’ll be doing the football team then!”* and [you have] *all of these expectations on you as a member of staff as well and... and suddenly you’re sort of pigeon holed.*

However, the gendered division of school labour also works in ways that reassert male privilege, for example when parents associate male teachers with authority and position them as powerful enough to address deep-seated inequalities, in sharp contrast with the long-lasting association between women and the devalued and misrecognised aspects of being a teacher (Acker, 1995; AUTHOR 1, 2008). While the gendered division of school labour and the association of men with authority in particular have preceded the emergence of discourses of role modelling, this rhetoric appears to further justify the gender binary and the higher value conferred to masculinities over femininities, as exemplified by Will’s narrative:

*...my children who come from very socially disadvantaged backgrounds, you know, they come from dysfunctional families, they don’t have stable role models in their lives and that does have a very negative impact on them and parents will often come into me and say ‘Mr [X], can you talk to them because you’re a man’. You know and I’ve had that said to me: ‘You’re a man; they’ll listen to you’. (Will, Primary, Project 2)*

As well as this association of masculinity with authority, we also found that male teachers’ careers do benefit from their minority status with discourses of role modelling reinforcing male privilege (Simpson, 2004). Indeed, interviewees’ narratives suggested that these discourses could positively influence decisions regarding the recruitment and promotion of male staff. In particular, practices of positive discrimination towards men in schools seemed to be common knowledge (see Blau & DeVaro, 2006; AUTHOR 1, 2008):

*I think we need men, definitely... I actually did two weeks in a primary school, and the guy... they had one... apart from the Head Teacher, well the deputy Head... there was one male teacher there and he was like gold dust. Apparently, wherever he went, he would get a job, because he was rare, because... first of all, he was a black guy... and male and black... you don’t get many of those in schools. (Kimberley, Secondary, Project 1)*

*I did think about re-training as a primary school teacher and one of the things people said to me was, 'Oh, when you do that you become a Head really quickly because men do, you know', which is true I think. So I think definitely in primary education, men ... become Heads much quicker... It's not equal. (Thomas, Secondary, Project 1).*

As can be seen from the above, the discourse of role modelling encourages the differential treatment of men and women, and undermines women teachers. However, it is also worth noting here that this is only one of the many discourses deployed in teachers' narratives, with some simultaneously drawing on a discourse of equal opportunities to emphasise the need for recruitment and promotion procedures which are meritocratic rather than positively discriminating towards men so as to attract and retain them in the educational workforce:

*I wish there were more men at our primary schools as I think it would make things much easier for children as well, especially children who don't have a male role model at home. But I don't know that that is going to happen. I don't know what the answer is. But I do think that schools are generally trying very hard to promote equality and to try and promote equally. But at the same time, you have got to promote people into those jobs who can do the jobs, that are...you know, you've got to also have people on their merit and if a man is better with a job than a woman because they are better for it, then you should appoint them and you shouldn't be dictated to by gender. I think teaching is too important really for that. It should be more open-minded, you know, and it should be based on merit not gender at all, because it's the kids that lose out. (Emma, Secondary, Project 1)*

This positioning of male and female teachers at the intersection of several discourses (in this case role modelling and equal opportunities) is likely to mitigate the effects of the discourses of role modelling previously discussed in this article.

## **Discussion**

This article set out to explore the ways individual teachers engage with discourses of role modelling and to consider some effects of these discourses. As noted, in recent years, such rhetoric has become

more subdued in media and policy circles. However, this article highlights that discourses of role modelling retain some currency in schools.

In England, where the research reported in this article was conducted, policy claims about role modelling have often been underpinned by a fixed set of assumptions spelled out in the introduction to this article. A general consensus was found among research participants who asserted pupils, particularly boys, need role models, with male teachers effectively fulfilling that need. Beyond these commonalities, we also found that different narratives coexist regarding the gender-matching component of the discourse of role modelling. Three prevailing views were identified: first, some participants resisted the view that is widespread in policy and media circles that students adopt same-sex role models and that the gender-matching of teachers and students is desirable; second, some participants claimed that pupils choose same-sex role models, with gender-matching a sought-after occurrence; and third, some suggested that both boys and girls would benefit from being taught by male teachers, although this was not always stated explicitly.

Thus, while the notion of role model has become part of a ‘common-sense’ discourse (Robb et al., 2015), it is also clear that teachers do not passively reproduce the dominant policy frame. Instead, as has been found in this research in relation to the gender-matching component of the discourse, role modelling theories are taken up in different ways by different teachers. So as to grasp the complexity of the relationship between teachers’ narratives and the ‘policyscape’ (Ball, 1998), we suggest that it may be useful to conceptualise policy discourses as ‘conceptual repertoires’ (Burr, 1995), which can be drawn upon as a resource. Policy discourses are encoded/ decoded by teachers (Hall, 1973) and enmeshed with other resources available to them as they form their own hybrid views of their environment and professional identity.

This article also adds to a body of research highlighting the continuing effectiveness of the discourse of role modelling. First, we argued that discourses of role modelling encourage the surveillance of teachers’ behaviour as it is often assumed that these are ‘taken up’ easily by pupils, in the same way that it is assumed that policies are ‘taken up’ by teachers. While there is a long-standing concern for who teachers are, historically it is mostly women who have been the subject of such surveillance (see Kelleher, 2011, Mallozzi, 2014; Oram, 1989; Tamboukou, 2003). Discourses of



(male) role modelling, in conjunction with discourses positioning men working with young children as potential child abusers and sex predators (Cushman, 2010; Jones, 2004), have extended this surveillance to men. In the context of school risk-management cultures, an economy of visibility (Foucault, 1982) has developed, which requires that male teachers are *seen* to perform a ‘safe’ teacher identity and a ‘safe’ masculinity. This surveillance appears to be a source of social anxiety for some of our participants. Second, discourses of role modelling legitimate recruitment and promotion processes which favour men, as they have become the perceived solution to many of the problems faced by boys and, sometimes, even girls (AUTHOR 1, 2014; AUTHOR 1, 2008; Skelton, 2002).

More fundamentally, discourses of role modelling affect the way we think about gender and contribute to reinforcing the traditional gender order (Connell, 1987) which allocates privileges to those performing masculinity. Through their essentialist linking of women with ‘feminine values’ and of men with ‘masculine values’, role modelling discourses assert the existence of irreducible differences between both gender groups and ultimately reinforce gender binaries. Even more problematical, role modelling discourses reinforce the power differential and hierarchy between (teaching) masculinities and (teaching) femininities, as the former (the ‘solution’) are given higher value over the latter (‘the problem’) (Arnot, David, & Weiner, 1999; David, 2016; Pepperell & Smedley, 1998). Yet, simultaneously, the rhetoric of role modelling appears (and appears only) power blind, as gender and other equality matters becomes constructed as mere commodities or as forms of human capital serving the policy agenda, as is the case when male teachers are recruited to improve male students’ performance. Meanwhile, other gender issues, such as women teachers’ under-representation in leadership and management positions, are invisibilized within policy discourses despite the fact that the very same policy discourses compound these issues (Cushman, 2010; AUTHOR 1, 2008).

Given the longevity of this ‘drive’ by policy makers, the dearth of research on the effects of discourses of role modelling and the lack of consideration among policy-makers for empirical evidence challenging the assumptions underpinning this discourse is surprising. While the access of men and women to all professions is an important component of gender equality, a ‘buy in’ to the ‘men-are-the-answer’ mind-set by professionals is not only misguided but potentially damaging to

teachers as well as to the education of future generations. Diversifying the teaching profession and equally opening it to all gender groups and minority ethnic groups (Hutchings, 2002) is an important equality goal, which should be pursued in the name of social justice ideals rather than in the name of role modelling. In the light of this article and of recent scholarship in this area, of particular significance is the need to ensure that research on equality matters informs the work of policy-makers, head teachers and of individual teachers. This could be achieved through the inclusion of education policy and equality issues on teacher education programmes and continuing professional development, with this provision informed by recent research. Too often, discussions of being a role model remain broadly informed by 1950s functionalist and sex-role socialisation theories (e.g. Merton, 1957; Parsons & Bales, 1955) which, in research circles, have long been viewed as obsolete and simplistic when it comes to explain the way students' and teachers' identities are constructed, including in their gendered dimension (Britzman, 1993; Connell, 1987). In an effort to challenge on-going discussions and the broader context of recuperative masculinity and backlash politics within which they are located (Arnot, David, & Weiner, 1999; Faludi, 1991; Lingard & Douglas, 1999), these discussions need instead to be informed by recent empirical and theoretical work acknowledging the complexity, diversity and fluidity of subjectivities, and of the relationship between policy discourses, teachers and learners.

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